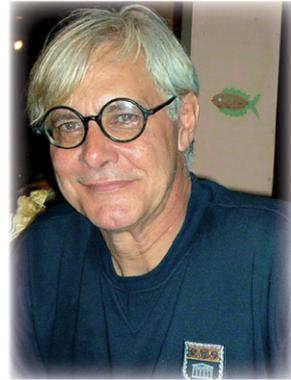


## Robert Carl-Heinz Shell (1949-2015)

### ~ A tribute ~

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On February 3<sup>rd</sup> this year, there passed away a historian who cast a giant shadow over South African history writing. This was Robert Shell (1949-2015), and the shadow that he cast was both literal and metaphorical: literal, in that he was well over six foot tall, and metaphorical in that his exceptional education and close involvement with modern international trends, such as quantitative social history, made him a unique and outstanding figure among South African historians.



I first met him when he was a student at UCT in the early 1970s. Chris Saunders was his mentor, and the famous British historian of Africa, Robin Hallet was also an early influence. At this time the new social history was coming in strongly – writers like Edward Thompson sought to rescue British working-class history from the “massive condescension of posterity”, and classic books from the Annales School were being translated into English from the French. A fortunate encounter with local historian Achmat Davids also helped focus Rob’s interests on the Cape Muslim community. In those years he also began a life-long passion for reading in the Archives – and he discovered a uniquely rich source on the functioning of Cape slavery – in the papers of a long-time British resident at the Cape- Samuel Hudson. But it must be said that it was very unusual at that time for English-speaking historians to concern themselves with pushing back into the period of Dutch rule at the Cape – which is what Rob did, being strongly convinced that slavery was a searing and formative experience in the history of South African race relations, and that the original foundations had been laid in the Dutch period.

But his career took a unique turn, when as a result of a series of fortunate accidents, he was invited to go and study at Rochester, in upstate New York, with the famous Marxist historian of American slavery, Eugene Genovese. Rochester, at that time, was slated to become a major intellectual centre for left-oriented social history, for in addition to Gene Genovese and his wife, the formidable Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the campus was also a home for the American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, whose writings reflected a uniquely powerful blend of the ideas of Freud and Marx, and who at that time was also writing penetrating essays on the social basis of black politics. Rob's induction into this environment was by total immersion – in his first week he was pressed into joining a picket-line being manned by graduate students! Rochester was very exciting, in more ways than one. Something of Christopher Lasch's ideas about the family must have rubbed off on him – because this was to be a major theme of his later writings. But despite the fact that the Genoveses' ideas about the fruits of Merchant Capital were highly relevant to the study of colonial South Africa, Rob somehow found abstract Marxist theorizing uncongenial and his empirical bent of mind was far more influenced by the work on quantitative methods of analysis of large-scale social data, offered by another member of the Rochester faculty, Stanley Engerman. Rob had been an early enthusiast for the use of the personal computer (at that time a rarity), and he was sufficiently much of an aficionado that a few years later he was selected by commercial developers to join an elite group of pioneers who tested and tried out new software intended for social scientists. Later on, Rob's unique knowledge of the resources of the Cape Archives, and his command of quantitative methods allowed him to supply South African data regarding the bodily development and height of slaves, to be fed into the Nobel Prize-winning work of Robert Fogel, Engerman's long-term associate in the study of American slavery. (This work uncovered an amazing fact: the extension of human life-span during the industrial revolution was in major part due to the growth in human stature – tall people tend to have fewer diseases and live longer.)

As his time at Rochester drew to a close he found himself romantically involved with a fellow history student Susan Charlotte Ladd – and one bright morning, they decided to elope to Cape Town, and get married. They established themselves in a flat in St Martini Gardens – ID du Plessis was a neighbour – and Rob found relevant and congenial work, helping to create displays on Cape slavery at the Cultural History Museum.

Alas, the marriage did not last and Rob grew restive, feeling that it was essential for him to move on and acquire a proper position in academe. So after a short while he was enrolled in the Ph.D. programme at Yale University under the watchful eye of noted South African historian, Leonard Thompson, who had been – together with the anthropologist Monica Wilson – the moving spirit behind the ground-breaking *Oxford History of South Africa*. At that time, South African studies at Yale were very strong: but as at Rochester, Rob found inspiration and mentoring in places other than the ones originally planned – he developed a particularly strong relationship with the veteran American historian Ed Morgan – author of *American slavery, American freedom*.

While at Yale, he also encountered the new trend towards neo-marxism in South African studies. Rob was not impressed. To Rob and other Liberals of my generation, Marx and Freud were serious stuff, but the logic-chopping of the Parisian pedant Louis Althusser was not – and it seemed to us that Althusser's own "epistemological break" if it had been followed, would have been a big set-back, sure to replace modernity with Aristotle.

In his years after leaving Rochester, Rob developed a number of important collaborations. One was with Rick Elphick, whose institutional base at Wesleyan, put him within commuting distance of New Haven. Together they wrote a seminal chapter on the Khoi-khoi, Slavery and Intergroup relations in the landmark compilation on South African social history edited by Elphick and Giliomee, called *The shaping of South African society*, whose first edition came out in (1979). The chapter soon attracted wide-spread academic attention, and it's account of slavery in the VOC Company years – particularly the extraordinary institution of the Company's Slave Lodge (which among other things provided brothel services), has been widely cited in the international comparative literature. Less noticed but just as important was it's pioneer attempt at slave demographics. Trying to get a handle on the size of the slave population, and it's relation to the slave trade, was to be a big part of the effort Rob expended in the years before and after his Yale thesis.

Another collaboration which was very important for Rob was with the Canadian historical geographer Leonard Guelke – here they were concerned with mapping the land-holdings of the trekboers as the frontier expanded during the long 18<sup>th</sup> century.

And his private life prospered: his second wife Sue Nicolaysen (born Susan Schneier), had also been trained as a historian – her graduate work had been

devoted to African tenant-farming in the old Transvaal, and she retained an interest in history despite giving it up for a first marriage to Wits academic Louis Nicolaisen. But she was independently wealthy and when she married Rob her money bought them a lovely 18<sup>th</sup> century inn overlooking a lake in the Connecticut woods, where Rob was able to establish his dream – a quantitative historian’s laboratory filled to the ceiling with books and computers, located alongside their home in an outhouse.

Together Rob and Sue had a daughter – Elisabeth. But as before the idyll did not last, the marriage broke up, and Rob experienced another rocky period before he fell on his feet once again, with the offer of a tenure-track Professorship at Princeton.

At that time Princeton was widely regarded as having the best history department in the world – and Rob was very privileged to enjoy day-to-day contact with such luminaries as Peter Brown, Lawrence Stone, Robert Darnton, and Natalie Zemon Davis. But, just as at Yale, the zeitgeist caught up with him, and he found himself reacting against strong winds of doctrine which were gusting around the movement known as post-modernism. (As Shamil Jeppie nicely put it: Rob was unenthusiastic about POMO because Rob was most definitely a child of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment!)

To be a candidate for tenure, he needed to turn his Yale PhD on Cape slavery into a book. So for several years he was hard at work on the volume which was to become his main enduring legacy: *Children of bondage. A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838*.

The book has many unusual features, but the one which first strikes the reader as one turns the pages is the immense number of graphs and pie-charts. This is quantitative history rendered visible. The anecdotes and the narrative are there (Rob loved to tell stories) – but the regular flow of numbers is constantly present also to give reassurance about the nagging question: how representative are these stories, how general is this analysis? This surely is the right way to do social history when it is not micro-history – and it marked a big advance on the Wilson-Thompson *Oxford History of South Africa*.

(But alas, this has not been maintained, for in this regard, as in some others – the more recent *Cambridge History* marks a distinct step backwards.)

But there are other less obvious virtues – such as Rob’s attempts to firmly ground social history in the Annales tradition and the economic analysis of

slavery which he learnt from Stan Engerman. Another is Rob's general mastery of the comparative literature on slave societies so that both the uniqueness and commonalities of Slavery at the Cape can be properly judged and measured.

One major feature, which was controversial at the time of writing and has remained so – is Rob's emphasis on the role of socialization into the family as part of the working of slavery in the domestic domain. This "Family Model" was one of Rob's most original contributions – (but is perhaps ripe for revision in this post-Freudian age.) The phenomena he wrote about certainly are part of the historical reality – but is his analysis correct? Doubt persists, but so far nobody has risen to the challenge of giving a better explanation.

Another major intellectual contribution was more of a question than a thesis. This was to point out that conversion to Islam was a huge feature of Slave society at the Cape – it was not as if the Cape somehow was uniquely successful at importing Muslim slaves. Readers of Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, roll* will recall the tremendous impact Genovese assigns to the cultural and social aspects of the creative encounter with Christianity undertaken by the slaves in North America. Yet in South Africa this did not happen and Islam seems to have won out repeatedly whenever there was competition with various Christianizing forces. Rob seems to have been the first historian to have seriously felt the challenge of needing to respond to the urgent question: why?

One old answer was to suggest that the high prestige of political exiles like Sheik Yusuf made Islam attractive to outcast and socially excluded individuals – but Rob was not satisfied with this answer – there needed to be some concrete advantage for the individual convert – this is not a blind process of following in the footsteps of charismatic leaders. His first thought was to stress the attractiveness of Islamic rituals such as the daily prayers, and also the significance of communal rites and ceremonies marking the stages on life's way. Another thought was the relative handicap for Christianity of slaveholders fearing that Christian conversion would lead to emancipation. Rob achieved something of a first in international slavery studies by uncovering the relatively liberal canons of the Calvinist Synod of Dordt (1618) on the subject of baptism and slavery – (even David Brion Davis, author of that magisterial work *The problem of slavery in Western culture* (1964), didn't know about Dordt.)

Rob returned to this problem again and again and in his later reflections, such as the synthetic account of Islam at the Cape which he wrote for the volume *The History of Islam in Africa* edited by Levtzion and Pouwels (2002), many different factors possibly swaying the choice for or against Islam are put into the balance and brought under scrutiny.

About Rob's later career I do not want to say much. He returned to South Africa, and an appointment at Rhodes. The skills he had acquired as a historical demographer could be utilized on the local scene and he joined up with South African professional demographers and became an early AIDS activist.

But in University politics he was something of a stormy petrel, and his criticism of the leadership at Rhodes University earned him the unrelenting hostility of that powerful clique. Rob enlisted in any number of worthy causes, but he was not always careful or judicious in what he wrote when he entered into controversy (as his lawyer, Sarah Christie, had to warn him on a number of occasions). Yet the savage and totally disproportionate revenge to which he was subjected by the Rhodes management was a dark day in the history of Academic Freedom in South Africa – his protests about academic harassment themselves lead to intensified persecution, and so virulent was the hatred with which he was pursued that he was prevented from landing an alternative appointment at Stellenbosch. (This was one of those near-misses which left us all impoverished and about which one can only register a sense of opportunities snuffed out). In the end friends and admirers at UWC had to step up to the plate with a stopgap appointment to do research and a little teaching in history and statistics.

However, while at Rhodes his personal and private life took a decided turn for the better, when he met and married his third wife. Sandy Rowoldt spent her entire career working as a librarian (first at the Cory Library then at UCT) but she has also had the passion and commitment of the true historian, and in Rob's final years turned out to be a wonderful intellectual companion and helpmeet to him, as they embarked on a whole series of enterprises to provide tools for the working historian and multimedia resources to help put Cape history on the map.

Throughout his career Rob enjoyed interacting with students – and he had attracted some very gifted students (such as Shamil Jeppie), and also with colleagues from other academic disciplines and from foreign academic communities.

In these last years too he received remarkable recognition from outside the historical profession, as when Archbishop Tutu ( a friend and fan from Rob's UWC days) suggested to the government of Mauritius that Rob might be a suitable person to preside over a one-man commission to enquire into the long-run effects of Slavery and Indentured Labour in that part of the Indian Ocean World. Activists and politicians from Third World Countries, have on a number of occasions called for reparations to be paid for slavery analogous to Germany's payments to holocaust survivors. But the analogy is somewhat forced and tendentious, and anyway, it is not altogether blindingly obvious who should count as next-of-kin for either victims or perpetrators. So this task was likely to be a political hot potato and fraught with difficulties whatever happened. Rob nonetheless thought he saw a way forward, hoping he could get large companies who had profited from exploited labour in the past, to fund contemporary community projects – (and it would have been most interesting to see how this worked out in practice) – but alas, a shift in the kaleidoscope of alliances in Mauritian politics put pay to experimenting with these ideas.

From his youth Rob had been known to be a hefty consumer of tobacco – and this may have been what finally caught up with him, when in 2014 he was diagnosed with cancer. Like many people in this position he fought back – and Sandy bravely stood by him as he suffered agonies due to irradiation and chemotherapy. One high point was a late visit from his daughter Elisabeth, who after a separation which had lasted many years flew in from Brazil, to spend time with her father on his death-bed. When it came the descent was swift.

Throughout his life, Rob had been prolific in turning out short articles for the journals (usually from his latest discoveries in the Archives), so readers of his work became familiar with vivid vignettes – such as his story about slave children feasting on the silkworms they were sent to look after – or unforgettable characters, such as Rangton of Bali.

But there were also larger projects many of which remained unfinished at his death.(One such, which was very close to Rob's heart was that the Van Riebeeck Society should publish a properly annotated and adequately representative, selection from the Hudson Papers).

Sandy will be carrying on with this legacy. We wish her all good speed.

## **Memories of a Soulmate: A tribute to Robert Shell**

**~ 13 February 1949-03 February 2015 ~**

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Robert Shell, the acclaimed historian of Cape slavery, was born and grew up in South Africa due to the kind of unjust coincidence that he spent his adult life fighting. His father Heinrich (Heinz) Schelowsky, born in Hamburg in 1902, worked for many years as a journalist in China before docking in Cape Town on his way home in 1933. Waiting for the ship that would take him home, Heinz made his way to Cape Town's German Club. There he found a telegram from his mother. It read: "Never come back to Germany STOP Hitler has been elected Chancellor STOP". So Heinz remained in Cape Town. Regrettably, he spent much of World War II interned, his only offence being German-born. Released at war's end, he returned to Cape Town where he met Louie Bosman, twenty years his junior. They fell in love, married and, on 13 February 1949, Louie gave birth to their only child, Robert Carl-Heinz Schelowsky. In the aftermath of the war years, Heinz Schelowsky changed

their surname to Shell.

Robert Shell grew up in and around Cape Town and attended the South African College High School (SACS). After his father died unexpectedly when Robert was 12, he and his mother remained in Tamboerskloof where his mother ran a boarding house. When Louie remarried, the family moved to Kommetjie where she and Robert's step-father ran the old Kommetjie Hotel. Robert fished for crayfish and helped out part-time in the hotel bar.

Robert's political awareness developed early. Good friend, Martin Plaut, in his obituary published earlier this year, recalled the first time he met Robert. It was at the University of Cape Town before Robert had enrolled as a student. "We were together at the 'sit-in' in 1968, protesting against UCT's refusal to appoint Archie Mafeje. In a way Rob never stopped protesting".<sup>1</sup>

Robert enrolled at UCT in 1970, graduating BA Honours (History) in 1974 under the guiding eye of Christopher Saunders. The title of his Honours thesis was "The Establishment and Spread of Islam at the Cape from the beginning of Company Rule to 1838". The history of Islam at the Cape, alongside the history of slavery at the Cape, would thereafter dominate his research and writing.

Robert proceeded to Rochester University in New York State, drawn by the scholarship of both Professor Stanley Engerman, the leading proponent of the application of quantitative methodology in the context of history – cliometrics, and Professor Eugene Genovese, a leading scholar with revolutionary perspectives on slavery. He graduated MA in American History there in 1976.

In 1978, Robert entered Yale University as a doctoral candidate under the supervision of Professor Leonard Thompson. He was awarded his PhD in 1986, with a thesis that is still in high demand by scholars of Cape slavery: "Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope: 1680-1731". He was immediately offered a two-year contract as Visiting Lecturer in African History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. From the sunshine of Santa Barbara he moved in 1988 to the icy winter of the University of Oswego in New York State as Visiting Professor of African History for a period of six months. Robert then accepted the position of Assistant Professor of African History Princeton

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<sup>1</sup> M Plaut, "Robert Shell: My friend", *Martin Plaut: Word Press* (available at <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2015/02/04/robert-shell-my-friend/>).

University, headed by Professor Robert Tignor. He held this position for eight years.

All this time Robert had been working on what today remains a classic on Cape slavery: *Children of bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1994). He was determined that this work should also be published in South Africa at an affordable price, especially for the descendants of the slaves whose lives he had described so memorably. The University of Witwatersrand paperback edition was published in June/July 1995 and was launched in Cape Town and Grahamstown in June/July 1995.

The launch in Grahamstown took place in the Rhodes University Library during the National Arts Festival in July 1995. I remember standing inside the Library entrance as Robert walked through the open double doors, bobbing his head slightly to avoid the lintel, as was his habit given his impressive height of 2.06m. He was wearing his favourite hound's-tooth jacket and his familiar, boyish grin of delight.

We had first met in Grahamstown five years earlier, thanks to invitations to Sunday lunch from Rodney Davenport (then Professor of History at Rhodes) and his wife Betty. At the time, we were both committed to existing relationships, but the foundations of our lifelong research relationship and unique friendship were laid that sunny Sunday.

Robert always loved to tell the convincing and hilarious story that he won me in a game of poker. It is true that I agreed to join in that fateful poker game along with our mutual friend Rob Gordon. We played under classic, almost filmic, circumstances: green baize cloth over a circular dining table, low-slung, shaded light over the table, a bottle of something and clouds of smoke from the cigarettes we all puffed heavily that night. It is equally true that, as a total novice, I lost the game decisively, and that Rob Gordon also threw in his hand. Robert never tired of telling this story with enormous relish and laughter, in which his different audiences over the years always joined with great glee. He was spectacularly good-looking, a truly beautiful man, blessed with extraordinary humour and charisma. He was also impossibly tall, so that not only intellectually but physically he always stood out in a crowd. One of the things that people found so attractive about him was that his intellectual interests were extraordinarily wide, as was his circle of friends. He was laudably open-minded as well as both emotionally and intellectually

generous.

Robert always had a highly original take which showed both in his scholarship and in life. This emerged even when writing a letter of condolence to me after a double family tragedy in September 1994. His letter arrived in the post, penned in his exquisite script in red ink. He wrote that he had heard what had happened and could scarcely believe something so terrible could have occurred. He concluded: "God must have been asleep at the switch". I read his letter and burst out laughing. That was his gift: to see and say things so freshly. Of all the hundreds of communications I received during those dark days, his was the only one that made me laugh as it touched my heart. I think that was probably the moment I fell in love with him though it was only in 1995 that our friendship blossomed into romance.

By the time Robert accepted a position as Senior Lecturer and Head of Department of History at Rhodes University (East London campus) we were ready to consider the possibility of a life together. We discovered "Smiling Waters", an idyllic smallholding at Kidd's Beach, south-west of East London. Our boundaries were a nature reserve, a farm, a lagoon and the Indian Ocean only a short walk away as our frontage. The smallholding boasted orchards of guavas and macadamia nuts, pawpaw and other fruit trees, as well as plentiful strawberries and vegetables. We were blissfully happy there.

At Rhodes, Robert was awarded one of only three Population Research Units in the country by the National Research Foundation. The United Nations funded the equipping of a full computer lab for his demography students. Robert's innovative and pioneering research into the regional and national impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, then running rampant and uncontrolled throughout the country, began in earnest.

In 1997, Robert was invited (with his partner), to attend a conference in Jerusalem led by Nehemiah Levtzion and Randell Pouwels. The purpose of the conference was to bring together specialists in the history of Islam in different areas of Africa, to contribute towards a major scholarly publication. Robert was selected to cover Islam in southern Africa. I had a long overdue research trip to Jerusalem that had been planned for over three years, so this was an ideal opportunity to meet my promised obligations as well. Within three years, the award-winning *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000) appeared on the bookshelves of all African studies libraries. Robert contributed the substantial chapter entitled: "Islam in

Southern Africa, 1652-1998”.

But Robert was never one to keep quiet when he perceived acts of injustice and his brave stance led to a difficult time in our lives when, disgracefully, Rhodes University hounded the whistle-blower. As Bryan Rostron wrote in an obituary published earlier this year:<sup>2</sup>

Following claims that white administrators at the East London campus were being appointed while several black academics were retrenched in the name of cost cutting, Dr Shell was one of three academics chosen to produce a report. Shell wrote a personal appraisal alleging, among other transgressions, “both nepotism and cronyism” at the East London campus. He faxed his findings to the vice-Principal. This led to an acrimonious dispute and the eventual firing of Shell on a technicality, provoking an international academic uproar. Senior colleagues from Rhodes University, including the Professor of History, protested vehemently on his behalf, as did prominent historians all over the world, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. In South Africa Professor Herman Giliomee, then Professor of Political Studies at Cape Town University, wrote directly to the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes, stating: “I wish to protest against Rob Shell’s dismissal. My perception is that Rhodes has acted out of all proportion to the misdemeanour, and that its action will cast a pall over academic freedom in South Africa and the job security academics need if they wish to expose the flaws of institutions. This action will also damage Rhodes’s name for many years to come.” The controversy took a heavy toll on Shell, deeply disillusioned with a lack of tolerance for dissent in post-apartheid academe. Some of his colleagues claimed there had been a disinformation campaign of dirty tricks from the university. His car was also vandalised. A firm offer of a Professorship at Stellenbosch was shamefully cancelled at the very last minute. It was a dark hour for South African scholarship.

Amidst this turmoil, we married in a quiet ceremony on 10 August 2000 in Grahamstown. Even before the University’s disciplinary proceedings wound their way to their unhappy conclusion, the University of the Western Cape contacted Robert asking if he would be interested in applying for an upcoming vacancy in their Department of Statistics. We had no idea if he would be successful in his application or not but were gratified by this bold act of support from a fellow academic institution. There was also strong support from the University of Cape Town when their Academic Freedom Committee offered material assistance towards our legal fees which we received with gratitude.

The UWC application was successful and we moved, with light hearts, to the Mother City. For Robert it was a welcome home-coming; for me a return

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<sup>2</sup> B Rostron, “Slavery scholar more feted abroad”, *Business Day*, 2 March 2015.

to my academic alma mater. In September 2001, Robert was appointed Professor of African Historical Demography in the Department of Statistics for a period of five years. At the end of this contract period, he was appointed Extraordinary Professor of African Historical Demography, a position he held until his death.

Unexpectedly, Robert was awarded the Nelson Mandela Chair in African Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi in July 2003. This appointment was for a period of six months during which he delivered a series of lectures on African History to his students, all doctoral candidates. We forged good friendships and those six months in India changed our *Weltanschauung* for ever.

In 2007, Robert was approached by the Mauritian government to act as Commissioner for their own proposed Commission of Truth and Justice. We had fruitful talks with then Prime Minister Dr Navin Ramgoolam but unfortunately he was not directly involved with the administration of the Commission. Thus many of the important issues discussed between the Prime Minister and Robert as Commissioner could not or would not be implemented. Even the name of the Commission itself was in contention. Robert wished to incorporate the concept of Reconciliation (in the spirit of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and in keeping with South Africa's own Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and was supported strongly on this point by the Prime Minister. But this appeal fell on deaf ears. Research data, promised while the ink was still wet on the contract, and assured in terms of the powers of the Commissioner, was denied to Robert when the Commission's work finally began. Doors that had been promised would be open were slammed shut. Crucial data and the results of previously commissioned research were kept under lock and key. In the middle of all this, Robert suffered a serious heart attack in December 2008. Combined with the intransigence of those with a different agenda, this resulted in his withdrawal from the project. It was an opportunity for Mauritius sadly lost.

He never recovered fully from that heart attack and never again played squash, a game at which he excelled. He was a quarter-finalist in the US Open (Squash) in 1988. He particularly enjoyed his games with Professor Robert Tignor at Princeton, Bobby Evans in Grahamstown/Sevenfountains and Leslie Selbourne from the Statistics Department at UWC. Ironically, only five days before his initial cancer diagnosis in September 2014, he received a clean bill of health from his cardiologist, who went so far as to tell him he could

go out and buy a new squash racquet and get back onto the court – with the proviso that he played only with “rabbits”, like his wife.

Throughout July and August 2014, Robert complained about a persistent pain in his back. We thought it was muscular, probably the result of hauling his heavy Honda GoldWing motorbike up onto its stand. But none of the usual unguents and massage helped. Eventually our GP’s locum recommended an examination by a series of specialists. Within days, we were informed that he had stage 4 lung cancer which had metastasised throughout his body, including his spine. He was told he had 3-12 months to live (but closer to 3, warned our mercifully straight-talking physician).

Robert died at our home in the Gardens on the night of 3 February 2015, ten days shy of his sixty-sixth birthday. We had twenty wonderful and extraordinary years together, packed with boundless enthusiasm, fun and energy. He had what one obituary referred to as “an unstuffy brio and an uproarious laugh”. We laughed a lot.

We were partners, husband and wife, lovers, friends, playmates, researchers, scholars (he a seasoned, brilliant scholar, me an earnest novice). We found each other relatively late in life and that made us value every single moment of our time together. We were consummate soulmates.

The generosity of Robert’s scholarship was legendary, as was the enthusiasm and encouragement that he imparted to his students, and to colleagues and researchers locally and around the world. He devoted four decades of his scholarly life to the history of the old Slave Lodge in Adderley Street, promoting it as a fitting memorial to what Robert called, ‘murdered memories’. His aim was to make as much information readily available to the people of the Cape, in particular to enable the descendants of slaves to recover and reclaim their past and true identity. To this end he published his accessible, affordable e-book *From Diaspora to Diorama* – more than 9,500 pages of primary and secondary sources relating to the history of the Lodge and its inhabitants across the centuries.

Ironically, the day after Robert’s death the Western Cape Department of Cultural Affairs contacted me saying that as Robert had been nominated for a Ministerial award, would he be attending the awards ceremony the following Monday evening in the Baxter Theatre? I had to tell them that, sadly, Robert had died only hours before their call. I asked if I could represent Robert

instead. The Ministerial awards were the final item on the programme, the acme of the ceremony. Robert was awarded (posthumously) a Ministerial Award for Lifetime Achievement for his unique scholarship dedicated to the people of the Cape. It was with a great sense of pride that I received this award on his behalf. I only wish he had lived to know about this official tribute to his lifelong dedication and scholarship.